

## 12. Homeless Campers

Depending on who you talk to, the most independent-minded homeless—or the least competent—are camped out in Utah's fields, under the freeways, in storage sheds,<sup>1</sup> abandoned buildings, and dead automobiles. The University of Utah's 1995 study showed that 9.6 percent of those interviewed were living "outdoors in [a] camp", with another 7.4 percent living in cars or other vehicles, and 3.7 percent living on the streets, or better than twenty percent camped out in some way. Camping out takes a certain hardiness that is best captured by the experiences of a keen observer named Gerald Newlon, whose job it is to deliver the remains of murder, suicide and accident victims to the medical examiner's office. "The grim trials of the homeless are told in the bodies that Gerald Newlon picks up each day," says the *Provo Daily Herald*, and Newlon reports that "the amazing thing is how old they look." Many, says the paper, look to be at least 60, with white hair and wrinkled skin, but "then investigators discover they were only in their 30s." "You have to have compassion for these people," according to Newlon, "you know that they've been through a lot." And, he adds, "some of them die over a bottle of wine."<sup>2</sup>

The streets are dangerous and cold, and often the only comfort homeless campers have is a bottle or a dog. A 1993 roundup compiled by the *Deseret News* called "Dangers of Life on the Streets" chronicled the following:<sup>3</sup>

- **April 4**—A man described as a transient shot a hole in the ceiling of an acquaintance's north Redwood home while having a flashback of his military tour of Vietnam.
- **April 26**—A fight between two transients in Pioneer Park, 400 W. 400 South, ended after one of the men fatally stabbed the other in the chest. Passers-by chased a 43-year-old suspect, who was arrested as he ran from the park. Neither man was familiar to employees at shelters in the area.
- **July 15**—A 50-year-old transient died five days after being found face down in a pool of blood in the parking lot at 640 S. 300 West. Witnesses said he had been beaten with a board by another transient, 46, who was charged with the murder.
- **July 16**—A man who said he had been drinking with other transients approached a Utah Highway Patrol trooper at a 7-Eleven at 300 W. 3300 South just before 10 p.m. and told the trooper he had been stabbed in the chest. The victim was treated at an area hospital.
- **Aug. 22**—A 46-year-old transient was found dead by friends in a wooded area near a transient camp south of I-80 and west of Highland Drive. Police said the man died of extensive head injuries from a severe beating. The friends described the attacker and police arrested a 25-year-old man near 1100 S. 300 West, who later pleaded guilty to manslaughter charges.

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<sup>1</sup>Chris Jorgensen, "Utah 'Squatters' Settle for Less," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 10 January 1993 gives the story of a 46-year-old artist named Jesse Frazier who "lives in a downtown storage shed he rents for \$50 a month. He has no electricity or running water, cooks on a propane burner and uses a gas-powered lantern for light and heat." But the paper goes on to make the argument, "Mr. Frazier is not a transient or a vagrant. He is one of hundreds of so-called 'squatters' carving out a permanent home in Utah's unfriendly urban frontier." Police officer Pam Grimes is quoted as saying of these "squatters" that "they don't have the same respect for property rights that the rest of society has. And they can be spreading disease and things. That's why we have health laws." However Salt Lake City Fire Department Capt. Dan Andrus refutes the arguments homeless squatters cause fires: he says of the 250 house fires they see in a year, "the vast majority of vacant-building fires are caused by neighborhood kids playing with matches" (also see "Squatters Carve Out Lifestyles, Homes in Utah's Urban Frontier," *Provo Daily Herald*, 13 January 1993).

<sup>2</sup>"This Man Sees What's At The End of the Underside of Life," *Provo Daily Herald*, 11 August 1993.

<sup>3</sup>"Dangers of Life On The Streets," *Deseret News*, 14 November 1993.

- **Aug. 26**—A man described as a transient was hit and killed by a Union Pacific train at 2:44 a.m. near 425 W. 500 South. Police were not sure whether the 43-year-old man was sleeping on the tracks or was just too intoxicated to get out of the way when the train rolled over him.
- **Sept. 3**—A woman treated at a hospital for a puncture wound said she was stabbed by a 35-year-old transient who threatened to kill her and her family near 5100 S. State. The man was later charged with aggravated assault.
- **Oct. 25**—A homeless shelter resident was treated at LDS Hospital for lacerations on his face and head after being beaten with a baseball bat and robbed of about \$200. The 30-year-old victim told police a man he described as a transient approached him at 700 W. North Temple Monday about 11:10 p.m. and demanded money from him. He then hit the victim at least twice with the baseball bat before taking the money from his wallet, according to a Salt Lake police report.
- **Oct. 25**—Salt Lake police were clearing out Pioneer Park just before midnight when a 35-year-old transient approached them and said he had been stabbed. Officers could tell Joseph Morris was bleeding from the abdomen and asked if he could point out the person who stabbed him. Morris pointed to a group of four men but was unable to tell the officer which was the attacker. The officers seized a knife from one of the four men. Morris was treated at LDS Hospital.
- **Oct. 29**—Two men, at least one described by police as a transient, were found dead near train tracks—one at 900 S. 500 West at 3:25 a.m. and the other near 12000 W. 2100 South about 4:43 p.m.

For several years, dozens of people were camped out every night on the sidewalk in front of Travelers Aid Society, a trend first noted in our 1991 report, when Gregory A. Fredde wrote, "On August 8, 1991, Patrick Poulin of Traveler's Aid Society reported he had stopped by the shelter at 4:30 a.m. and found more than 50 people camped on the sidewalk on Rio Grande Street; more were camped under the lights near St. Vincent de Paul's soup kitchen. He attributed this directly to inadequate funding which forced the shelter to cut back the number of beds offered in the summer months."<sup>4</sup> This camping was discontinued in 1993 because of public safety and health concerns. Pamela Atkinson, chairperson of the Health Care Coordinating Committee for Homeless Individuals, reported on 23 January 1992 of her outreach to homeless camps in Salt Lake County that "we've probably identified about thirty-seven camps we know of; some are empty for winter." She said they have given them names, such as "Little Tijuana," "Giovanni Drive," and "The Condos."<sup>5</sup> Efforts by Salt Lake City's police department to burn down the camps and run out the residents have created controversy; the police have argued quite cogently that homeless persons are often victims of crimes by other homeless persons, and rooting out the criminal element with sweeps is necessary; advocates counter that the sweeps are too general and are victimizing innocent homeless persons. The *Salt Lake Tribune* editorialized that "there are no quick fixes for homelessness, because to cure a complex problem, you've got to treat more than symptoms."<sup>6</sup> Pamela Atkinson reported on 21 July 1992 that she knew of 14 persons camped in caves.<sup>7</sup> We

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<sup>4</sup>Gregory A. Fredde, *Utah's 1991 Homeless Count* (Salt Lake City: Community Development Division, September 1991), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Notes taken at the Health Care Coordinating Committee for Homeless Individuals, 23 January 1992, 28 April 1992. There was a concentrated effort by Salt Lake City police in 1992 to burn down and close out the city's homeless camps (see also notes of this committee, 21 July 1992, 15 September 1992, as well as the Committee Minutes for 15 September 1992: "Pamela [Atkinson] reported that she spoke on the police harassment [of homeless people] and that the police are following the outreach teams to the camp sites"). Atkinson, vice president of mission services at Intermountain Health Care, has earned a legendary reputation as a compassionate advocate for the homeless; on 6 November 1991 she received a Community Services Award from Catholic Community Services (see *Intermountain Catholic*, 25 September 1992; "IHC Vice President Coordinates Charitable Efforts with Agencies," *The Daily Spectrum*, 26 December 1991; also see Nancy Hobbs, "A Woman of Influence", *Salt Lake Tribune*, 26 December 1993 p. D-1, D-3).

<sup>6</sup>"Easing Problem of Salt Lake 'Homeless' Includes More than Stricter 'Policing,'" Editorial in *Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 August 1992. In an earlier story the *Tribune* reported sympathetically on the threat of violence to the

recognize that methodologically, to count or estimate the numbers of persons camped in the general area on a given night is somewhat subjective, but we rely on Martha Burt's *Practical Methods for Counting Homeless People*<sup>8</sup> when she writes, "shelter operators are quite good at providing relatively precise statistics on characteristics they can see," explaining they are most reliable "if they are in a position to know and if they are asked at a general enough level." Our question about those believed to be camping in the immediate area of shelters fits this category, and we have been tracking this since 31 July 1991. However it should be born in mind that this is a somewhat subjective guess. Nevertheless, we find those numbers distributed as explained in the following chart:

Pamela Atkinson, the person most knowledgeable about homeless campers in Salt Lake County, submitted a 23 December 1993 report:

- **Camps**
  - There are approximately 30-40 camps in Salt Lake County. This number fluctuates as campers move around or are asked to leave certain areas by the police.
- **Number of Campers**
  - July - 200
  - January - 100
- **Characteristics of Campers**
  - High percentage of alcoholics.
  - Great independence; do not want to be in shelter and have to obey rules and regulations.
  - Many campers work full-time and try to save money for housing.
  - Undocumented immigrants are increasing in number in camps.
- **Camp Outreach**
  - Camp outreach was started three years ago. Its purpose is to reach out to homeless campers and:
    - Perform health assessment;
      - Give food to campers and encourage them to apply for food stamps;
      - Distribute clothing, sleeping bags, and toiletries, etc.; and
      - Give out information regarding resources and necessary referrals are made.
  - The same team goes out every week with three people. We avoid taking other people because of possible incidents. We are known by the campers and there is a fair amount of

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homeless population (Vince Horiuchi, "Violence Compounds Problems Among S.L. Homeless," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 28 January 1990, p. B-1). Complaints about police are not limited to Salt Lake City: a pair of transients arrested in Helper complained that their constitutional rights were violated because they were homeless by being held in the Carbon County jail for more than 80 hours; police countered that forensic tests caused the delay in release (Stephen Hunt, "Pair: We're Homeless, So We Were Detained," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 22 May 1991 p. B3). Harsher words were used in the *Deseret News*, where the policy of Salt Lake City was described in an editorial as "a shell game--trying to solve a chronic problem by moving it around" (see Lois M. Collins, "Homeless Fall Victim to 'Shell Game'", *Deseret News*, 7 April 1992). Under the leadership of Officer Lynn Miller and others, relationships between the police, homeless persons, and homeless providers has improved considerably in Salt Lake City.

<sup>7</sup>Notes taken at the Health Care Coordinating Committee for Homeless Individuals, 23 January 1992, 21 July 1992.

<sup>8</sup>(Washington, D.C.: Interagency Council on the Homeless & Housing and Urban Development, March 1992), p. 10.

trust between us. Periodically, we will transport sick individuals to the clinic or a hospital.

- The camps all differ in nature. Many campers feel safe on the ledges under the freeway, others hide out further in a field.
- Basically the Camp Outreach project has made a great deal of difference in people's lives. Many of the homeless people look forward to our visits. While serving dinner at the Salvation Army, I am often asked by our homeless friends when the next Camp Outreach will take place. Additionally, they also tell us of new or other campers around.

Some additional information comes from the statistics of Wasatch Homeless Health Care, which serves Salt Lake County and has asked about living arrangements of their homeless female patients. 34.9 percent (N = 461) of persons making their first contact at Wasatch Homeless Health Care are shelter residents; 65.1 percent (N = 859) live in "other" arrangements: "street/car/camp, etc." For those persons making repeat visits the percentages are 40 percent living in shelters, and 60 percent in "other" arrangements.<sup>9</sup> The male homeless population includes fewer campers and less persons in shelters: 43.1 percent (N = 1,295) in the shelter, versus 56.9 percent (N = 1,710) on the streets. For those homeless males making repeat visits to Wasatch Homeless Health Care, the percentages are nearly identical (45.4 percent in the shelters, 54.6 percent in "other").<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>See "Table 2. Selected Demographics and Other Information N = 1,320 Homeless Female Patients N = 3,261 Encounters Seen From January 1, 1993 - November 30, 1993 Wasatch Homeless Health Care."

<sup>10</sup>See "Table 2. Selected Demographics and Other Information N = 4,325 Homeless Patients N = 9,928 Medical Encounters Seen From January 1, 1993 - November 30, 1993 Wasatch Homeless Health Care Program, SLC Utah, December 27, 1993."